

Expatriate director brings it all home

RICHARD WHITEHALL

The surprise hit of the San Francisco Film Festival was "La Permission" (Story of A Three Day Pass), a low-budget feature made in Paris and Normandy by an expatriate black American, Melvin van Peebles.

A film of great wit and charm mixing reality and fantasy it deals with the week-end leave of a black soldier (Harry Baird) stationed in Europe, who meets and has a brief and disillusioning love affair with a French girl (Nicole Berger).

Emotionally very simple and direct, filled with a self-mocking humor which seems to exist within any oppressed minority, the movie is extremely sophisticated visually.

After the first showing Van Peebles admitted that his movie might seem overly naive to an American audience. "It was intended for a French public," he said. "I had to keep things simple because they would never understand the fine points of white-Negro bias in this country. My next film will be different, a French subject. I don't want to risk being stereotyped as the director of Negro Pictures."

Van Peebles, small, lithe, articulate (at times he seemed almost ashamed of being so articulate) and 35 has come up with a movie which, for all its simplifications, is, I think, going to establish him as someone to be reckoned with.

Who is Melvin van Peebles? After the success of his movie San Francisco claimed him as it's own, but it's a forced adoption at best. He was born and



Melvin van Peebles, director

raised on the south side of Chicago, where his father had a tailor shop. He went to college and got his degree in English literature from Ohio Wesleyan ("I had a scholarship and I mopped floors—the whole thing"), and then spent three and one-half years in the Air Force.

"When I came out of the Air Force I tried for a job with the airlines or something, but they weren't hiring Negroes at all. Then I went to Mexico. I lived there for a while, starting in on my first book—my first novel—which I didn't finish at the time. Then I came back to San Francisco which I'd seen in my service days. The job I ended up with was driving cable cars, despite my degree and all. While I was doing that I had an idea for this book about it. It started as an idea for an article, but I got involved into a book.

"I wrote the book. Which went quite well. Then I was fired from my job. I worked in the post office, taking the Negro degree in post office-ology. I was very discouraged, very beat and everything. So I went to Holland. Anyway I'd become interested in films. Because what I wanted to do was reach a wide audience, and a wide audience today is either sitting in front of a television set or in the

movies. I said, well, if they won't come to me, I'll go to them. I made three films."

RW: You made them here?

MVP: Three short films at the time I was in San Francisco. And they got shown. Cinema 16. Vogel. Amos Vogel. I went to Holland, and in Holland I was getting my doctor's degree in astronomy, and other things were falling rapidly apart—my health, my marriage, and so forth—and just when I was in my worst possible period I had an invitation from the Cinematheque in France, who had seen the short films. So I went down there. I got down there with a penny.

An invitation doesn't mean the same thing as an invitation means here. I went down and said, Jesus, here I am—and they said, That's nice, pleased to meet you, glad you could come. There I was, without a penny, couldn't say a word of French and—here I am now.

RW: You've written five novels, of which three have been published so far? Do you write in French?

MVP: My first two novels I wrote in English. But they don't publish me in the States. I decided that—the criticisms have been, so far, that I don't write like a

Negro should write—whatever that means.

RW: Do you find a freer atmosphere in Europe?

MVP: As things go its pretty rough in France too. I mean—a Negro has...

RW: Do you prefer Negro or black? Over here now the movement seems to be towards 'black,' and 'Negro' has become fairly objectionable.

MVP: I don't worry much about the semantics of the thing. I really don't know. I'll go along with whatever the current thinking is, because the people who are on the scene every day probably have reasons that I, not being on the scene, am not aware of. If they like black, that's the way we'll call it.

RW: Going back. You were in Paris at the invitation of the Cinematheque. No money. So what happened?

MVP: Well—then I started to sing and beg in the streets, just to stay alive. I survived.

RW: Strange you should say that.

(Continued on page 26)

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Black filmmaker succeeds

(Continued from page 7)
one moment when I was suddenly reminded of an earlier movie with Jess Hahn. I think Eric Rohner made it.
MVP: I know the film you're talking about. I never saw it. It was about an American or something?
RW: That's right. One summer he runs out of money, and has to beg an existence on the streets.
MVP: Well, I know Paris. I know

MVP: I'd like to continue writing and make good movies. I've got a new novel coming out when I go back. It's two short novels, the story of the film and another called "Party in Holland." I'd like to do that.
RW: And Hollywood?
MVP: Hollywood?
RW: Yes.
MVP: Oh!
If they want to deal on my terms. If they don't want to deal



Nicole Berger and Harry Baird in a scene from "La Permission" ("Story of A Three Day Pass").

the streets of Paris.

RW: You were staying alive. MVP: I was surviving. So then I did get with some guys and got to make a short film. The guy loaned me his boy friend because his boy friend wanted to be a cameraman. So he loaned me his boy friend—who'd begun to bug him—and some film. To please the boy friend. He didn't think anything was going to come out of it. And the film won a prize. Then I got to make other short films. Then I got out of the film business because it became quite clear to me I could go on the rest of my life making short films. But a short film is just like writing a short story. It's the novel that counts. And I wanted make a feature.

To make a feature you need money or a name. All the nouvelle vague boys had their own private fortunes. That's when I went back to writing, three novels and good reviews. After that—I asked for my director's card—French director's card—and got it, as an author bringing his own work to the screen. And from there I went ahead and made the film. It took nine years from there to here.

RW: And next?

on my terms, I'm not interested. I can go back to starving quietly, the way I was starving. Why bother to wake me up? They want to deal on my terms—great! There's no black director, and I think that's very funny. They're crying so much about the poor black, why don't they cry enough to give one of them a job.

RW: There's Poitier down there. An excellent actor, but I feel—almost all the time—he's being made to perform his bit, the way they were in the old days. The black American still isn't in films the way he should be. That's why I asked if you were interested in

'Demon Barber' Tod Slaughter films will show at UCLA's Royce Hall

RICHARD WHITEHALL

Tod Slaughter is one of the great lost talents of the British theatre. Seriously. Towards the end, just before his death, he turned up in a west-end (London) play, a poor thing which used his acting style as deliberate burlesque and which flip-flopped out of the theatre after about a week of performances.

But Slaughter was never a west-end act or, for that matter, never respectfully admired by the respectable. His richness wasn't for the martini mob but for those who belched over beer and picked on—music-hall, working-class people who are, unfortunately, practically non-existent now. Where one week, it would be jugglers and acrobats and dou-

Hollywood?

MVP: My problem is, as a Negro, the people expect that, at least, I should be grateful. I'm not grateful. I'm good. My work is good. If Hollywood wants to give me a job—great. If they don't want to—kiss my ass.

RW: Your film is beautifully photographed by Michel Kelber.
MVP: That's my boy. That's my boy. That's my buddy, Michel. We're big buddies.

RW: You wrote part—or all—of the music?

MVP: Part of the music. I wrote the music "Geronique." I wrote things. The text on some. I even sing one of the songs. The one in the night club at the end. When the guy's singing "Eleven . . . twelve." I was singing that.

RW: And where did you find Harry Baird?

MVP: In London. There wasn't the money to come over to the States and so forth. I brought the film in for 200,000 dollars in six weeks. I found him in London. Not doing big things. Always secondary roles.

I had a good ambience on the crew. Never any trouble. It was, Are you going to do it my way or how are you going to do it? It's just that simple. We had discussions, and sometimes a guy would say, Look . . . and he'd have it

right. So I'd say, Great. Sometimes he'd be right, but I'd still want to do it the other way. As far as I'm concerned I made it right good, my way. If I'd been the sweetest man in the world and come up with a bad film nobody would appreciate it. If I come up with a good film, that's what counts, that's what counts. So we're all happy about it, very happy about it.

RW: This was the first showing?

MVP: It hasn't come out in Paris yet. Now I hope to start another one in France. I hope to shoot one right away. Because, of course, my financial situation still isn't . . .

pastry shop of Mrs. Lovat. That good lady (played on the stage by Jenny Lynn, Slaughter's wife), promptly minced them up and baked them into meat pies. The discovery of Todd's victims came when someone found a button in a pie and became suspicious.

Slaughter, stropping his razor and confiding to his audience that "I'm going to polish this one off," makes for one of those great theatrical moments which always live forever in the memory of those who saw it.

Slaughter was theatrical, boldly, beautifully theatrical, feeding his audience all of the raw emotion it wanted. His public laughed and cheered and hissed and thrilled to these bloodtub melodramas. It was villainy played seriously for laughs, and yet the laughter

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